

## This American Jewish Life

A talk at Temple Beth Israel on February 14, 2014 by Bill Sarnoff

I am so flattered, truly flattered to be invited to speak here on Valentine's Day. This is the first time I have spoken from the bima in my 24 years of membership at Temple Beth Israel. At a loss on where to start, Rabbi Boris suggested the topic, "What makes my Jewish journey unique?" The answer came easy because directly above me is the Hebrew quote "Ufros Aleynu Sukkat Sholom" - "Spread over us a canopy of peace".

I and my brother and sisters were nurtured in peace. My parents liked each other all their lives. Can you imagine that? No angst, no stress, no family conflicts, no rivalry, so when I took to writing, most of what I scribbled was humor. Yet, outside our home was a raging depression. My father was a cabinet maker and the three basic industries to get struck down were furriers, jewelers and cabinet makers.

My parents could not afford to buy us a sled and we kids had to slide down the hill on my fat cousin - and she wasn't bad. An early embarrassment of being poor was in 1932 when I came to school in the second grade wearing brown and white shoes. My mother bought a brand new pair for 50 cents at a Salvation Army store. When I entered the classroom, the kids all laughed, so did the teacher and when the principal entered our classroom, he too laughed. I was so embarrassed because one shoe was brown and the other was white.

My Grandma (Bubbe) was a widow and kept a boarding house for immigrants in Chicago. She wrote letters to several HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Air Society) offices in Europe stating, any immigrant arriving at her Boarding House would be taught English as part of her services, interesting because she didn't speak a word of English. But she kept her word in the form of us grandchildren. She bought a daily newspaper (Chicago Daily News) and kept the radio on throughout the day. She offered us a nickel to read and translate the news into Yiddish whether they emigrated from Russia, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania or Lithuania because they all spoke Yiddish. A nickel in the depression to a kid was like a ten dollar bill and we competed for that nickel. Better yet, my sisters and I earned a dime from her boarders for writing letters in Yiddish script to their relatives in Europe and that made us kids feel really rich. That writing knowledge never left me and I still write my stories in Hebrew script for our little Yiddish club at TBI. My mother also wrote letters in Cirylic Russian as well as in Polish Roman letters for 25 cents.

My grandma did more than offer room and board. If one became ill or developed a toothache, she would drop everything and walk them to our neighborhood doctor or dentist and stay with them to bring them back safely, oftentimes delaying preparing the dinner meal for her boarders. Upon first arriving at her rooming house, she would take her boarders shopping for American style clothes, even baking old world delights like "kashe varnishkes" and "kreplachs".

I remember my mother saying, "Why do you go to such extreme efforts for your boarders?"

My Bubbe would answer in Russian, "We are a people-hood you know and each of us are angels with only one wing and we can fly only by embracing each other." That was my Grandma. As to her boarders, we were always surprised how quick they learned to understand, speak and read English, usually in just 3 months and with surprisingly good grammar.

Living in two worlds, the secular and Jewish, was easy for us. We never encountered anti-Semitism directed at us. We lived in a large Jewish neighborhood in Chicago (Lawndale).

My public grammar school was all Jewish student body, but not our teachers or principal. Our 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduating ceremony always concluded with "Hatikivah" with everyone standing at attention, even our teachers and principal. But home was the best place of all. At the dinner table, my father would ask us how our day in school went and share any new things we learned that day. He would always inquire, "Did you learn to think or did you learn to believe. He always expected us to think first and believe afterward.

When I was 10 in 1935 and in the fifth grade, I was selected to represent my school in Chicago's powerful 2 hour Memorial Day parade down Michigan Boulevard. I either wrote a theme on "What the Flag Means to Me" or drew an unfurled American flag was the reason I was selected. My family was so proud, seeing me straggling down the parade route, wearing a banner across my chest while holding a miniature flag. I mention this because directly behind us marching kids was a World War 1 army weapons carrier. On its flatbed were four kitchen chairs and sitting on each were four Union Army veterans carrying Springfield rifles with bayonets. At parade's end, these veterans were being hand carried off the weapons carrier and my father suggested I approach and thank them for their service. As the world knows, Springfield rifles without bayonet weighed 13 pounds and I was intrigued. I asked one of the veterans if I could hold his rifle for a moment. I was surprised when he tossed it to me - it was a replica made of balsa wood.

My recent published memoir is entitled "Around the Samovar" containing 45 stories when my extended family would gather around our Samovar each Wednesday evening and Sunday afternoon. I remember Shimshel the cigar maker would say little but dip freely into my grandmother's Slivovitz - a potent apricot brandy. The evening ended past midnight when all bundled up to face a raging Chicago winter storm. We were all asleep when there was a banging on the door and my father went to investigate. It was Shimshel, and my father told him there was no more Slivovitz. "I didn't come for Slivovitz" said Shimshel, "I came back for my crutches!"

I graduated High School in 1943 when World War 2 was raging and was quickly drafted into the Navy and served aboard an Army personnel transport (troop carrier) delivering troops to battle stations in North Africa, Europe and the Pacific returning home in 1946. Interestingly enough, my orthodox devoted grandma reminded me I could eat "traif" (non-kosher) food in war time - and I did. Being under stress in battle situations our crew of 427 men became loosely bonded. When our ship was decommissioned in New York, we gathered for a final banquet and at that time formed our Lucky Lizzie Association. Its purpose was to gather each September for a reunion and we did that for over 65 years. We became almost like family until 2011 when the Association came to an end and regret to comment, I am the last remaining crew member.

I arrived home in the summer of 1946 and returned to school that fall but things had changed. Partition was being discussed for the Middle East and the Zionist movement was in full force both at home and abroad. In 1947 I was dating a girl active in Hashomer Hadati or Hapoel Hamizrachi. We were at an informal gathering where the speaker discussed those impending times and mentioned the need for contributions and volunteer efforts. I had only recently learned our large extended European family had been annihilated except for a lone cousin my exact age bearing my identical Hebrew name (Ze'ev). Twenty six members in all were gassed in Treblinka and in their memory, our family sat shiva for 26 weeks amidst much sadness and travail. It was a difficult time for us.

On my way home from this Zionist gathering, I heard myself repeating the quote by rabbi Hillel in 32 BCE in Babylon, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, and if not now, when?" "This is a "achila Hashem" - a travesty before God to not support it and in November 1947,

found myself with other American, South African and Australian Jews for training and orientation in an unheated warehouse in Newark, N.J. That's where I came face to face with Nechemieh Pltatzky, a Warsaw ghetto survivor and our trainer. He reminded me of the biblical Yehoshuah readying for the battle of Jericho. His face was not a face, it was a flame in the Emek. It was the burning bush that spoke to Moses in the desert.

We would gather every morning around two kerosene space heaters in that vacant warehouse. Nechemieh would not greet us with "Boker Tov" (good morning) but with "L'Olam Lo'od" (Never Again). The highlight of our days were the coffee breaks in a local donut shop where the shop was warm and the coffee hot.

After training one afternoon in January 1948, Nechemieh asked me to join him in the donut shop. Buying our own coffee, he commented, "Ze'ev-khe, you are navy and you know about water landings but ours will be a land confrontation and we need foot soldiers. Is very expensive to feed you, so if your family can send \$200 a month, we can afford to have you train with us. I returned home in late January in time for spring classes.

My guest editorials and Letters to Editor in our local Register Guard newspaper and other media these past 23 years all pursue a negotiated settlement. Israel remains close to my heart and those extra efforts are my simple intent for "Heye Kol Kore Bamidbar" - to be a voice in the wilderness - for peace.